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A PROXY WAR IN ARABIA: THE DHOFAR INSURGENCY AND CROSS-BORDER RAIDS INTO SOUTH YEMEN.

The war in Dhofar, Oman, between 1963 and 1976, which pitted the insurgents of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PLFO) against the monarchical regime, has received renewed scholarly attention, thanks in part to the declassification of papers from the archives of the Sultanate's principal Western ally, the United Kingdom (UK).¹ The fact that the PFLO's principal source of external assistance was the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, otherwise known as South Yemen) is well-established in the historical record,² whilst in contrast covert action conducted by the Omani royal government and its British allies has received scanty coverage, aside from a few references in secondary source literature.³ However, declassified material from the British government's archives, notably from the Ministry of Defence (MOD), demonstrates that both the UK and Oman raised and trained groups of Mahra tribesmen – exiled from the PDRY – to launch cross-border raids into South Yemen between late 1972 and early 1975.

Covert action can be defined as clandestine activity conducted by governments to influence political, economic and strategic conditions in foreign countries, in which the former's involvement is intended to be both concealed and deniable. Proxy warfare, defined as the use of non-state para-military groups by countries either as a supplementary means of waging war or as a substitute for the overt use of force against an adversary, can be conducted under the criteria of covert operations, being carried out by states either as a means of coercing an adversary, disrupting the latter militarily, or indeed for a transformative objective such as regime change in, the promotion of separatism within, or the annexation of territory from the state subjected to attack by proxy.⁴ As Andrew Rathmell observes, covert operations and proxy warfare have been

characteristics of Middle Eastern politics since the mid-20th century, with Arab regimes using subversion and clandestine support for terrorism and insurgency in their own internecine struggles.⁵ Yet external powers have also used similar means to pursue their own regional interests; prime examples of such British activity include the UK Secret Intelligence Service's (SIS) involvement alongside the CIA in the successful coup against Mohamed Mossadeq in Iran (August 1953) and a failed one in Syria (November 1956), and Britain's clandestine backing for Royalist rebels fighting the Egyptian-backed Republican regime in Yemen between 1962 and 1967.⁶ As was the case with British and Omani covert operations against the PDRY, two or more states can collaborate in proxy warfare against a common enemy, although in these cases the sponsor states can have differing political objectives for doing so.

Using material from British archival sources, this article seeks to describe the origins and the scope of the Mahra raids into the PDRY in the latter phases of the Dhofar war (which were given the codename Operation *Dhib* by the British), examining in particular the reasons why the UK and Oman sought to employ these tribesmen as proxies. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of the Dhofar war, but to highlight an aspect of this conflict which has hitherto received very little academic study. The declassified evidence in the UK National Archives does not provide the basis for a complete account of Operation *Dhib*, yet there is sufficient archival material to outline when the British and Omani governments raised the Mahra tribal militias (known collectively as the 'firqat', with each individual formation a 'firqa') for cross-border incursions, what the objectives for proxy warfare were, and what challenges British civilian and military officials faced in managing this covert operation.

The Dhofar war and the UK's strategic objectives:

In April 1963 around 100 nationalist rebels commenced an insurgency in Dhofar, taking up arms against the reactionary Sultan, Said bin Taimur, who was a long-standing ally of the UK. The character of the insurgency changed after December 1967, after the British withdrawal from South Arabia and the emergence of a Marxist-Leninist regime in Aden. Provided with sanctuary, funds, training, and arms by the South Yemenis, the PFLO insurgency grew rapidly in size and scale, and gradually drove the small and poorly-equipped Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) into the coastal plain of Dhofar, threatening the provincial capital of Salalah by the summer of 1970. On 23 July that year Said was overthrown in a palace coup by his son, Qaboos, who was discreetly backed by British military officers assigned by the UK government on loan service with the SAF. Over the following five years, a progressively expanded SAF fought to wrest control of Dhofar away from the PFLO, aided by loan service officers, military supplies and a contingent of the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment (22SAS) sent from the UK, known as the 'British Advisory Training Team' (BATT). Oman also received significant military and financial assistance from other Gulf states, most notably an Imperial Iranian expeditionary force which was sent to the Sultanate in December 1973. By December 1975 the remnants of the PFLO had been driven across the border into the PDRY, although some insurgent elements continued to fight in Dhofar into the late 1970s.⁷

For both the Labour (1964-1970, 1974-1979) and Conservative (1970-1974) governments in office during this period, the UK's support for the Sultanate of Oman – and in particular the role of British military personnel both in directing the war against the PFLO and in combat operations with the SAF in Dhofar – was not to be disclosed to parliament or to the British or international media.⁸ Britain backed the royal regime fearing that an insurgent victory would destabilise Oman and other pro-Western states in the Arabian Gulf, threatening access to regional

oil supplies. Officials in Whitehall were particularly concerned that following the withdrawal of British forces from their bases in Bahrain and Sharjah, the newly-independent Gulf States of Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were vulnerable to revolutionary movements similar to the PFLO.⁹ However, the parlous state of the British economy and the demands placed by the UK armed forces' commitments (with NATO and the counter-terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland being MOD priorities, and also commitments requiring substantial numbers of troops) precluded overt military assistance to the Sultanate, and also imposed limits on the number of advisors and SAS soldiers Britain could contribute to the war effort. Ministers and officials in Whitehall were also continually wary of either a prolonged embroilment in the counter-insurgency campaign in Dhofar, or indeed an escalation of the war into a confrontation with the PDRY, and were also keen to withdraw even the limited number of British military personnel from Oman once this was politically acceptable to the indigenous government – not to mention the USA and regional allies such as Saudi Arabia. The UK government's concerns over escalation became particularly evident when the SAF became embroiled in border clashes with South Yemeni forces in May 1972 and October 1975.¹⁰

Whilst the UK never had more than a few hundred troops in Oman during the Dhofar war, it had a disproportionate share of influence during the campaign because Britons occupied key decision-making positions within the Sultanate. The Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces (CSAF) was a British Army officer on secondment; a Brigadier prior to December 1972 and henceforth a Major-General. Despite a policy of 'Omanisation' implemented in the early 1970s, up until the war's end the officer corps of the SAF consisted largely of loan service personnel from the Army, the Royal Navy (including Royal Marines), and the Royal Air Force.¹¹ Until Qaboos assumed the role for himself in May 1973, the post of Sultan's Defence Secretary was filled by two British officers during this period, Brigadier Pat Waterfield and (after January 1970) Colonel Hugh Oldman. The Omani Intelligence Service (OIS, known as the Oman

Research Department (ORD) after 1974) was also a creation of the SIS and also British military intelligence officers assigned to the SAF. Nonetheless, the Sultans were not passive actors and British ‘advice’ was not always heeded. One of the principal reasons why the UK government and British officials in Oman colluded in Said’s overthrow was his reluctance either to increase the size of the SAF or to conduct an effective counter-insurgency campaign against the PFLO that tempered repression with reforms. Qaboos himself has traditionally been regarded as more receptive to British influence than his father, yet he was ready to assert his own authority as Sultan and also frequently overruled the military guidance provided by CSAF, particularly after the ‘oil shock’ which followed the Yom Kippur War (October 1973) increased the size of his oil revenues.¹² As noted below, there was a clear divergence between British and Omani policy arising from Qaboos’ anger over South Yemeni support for the PFLO, and his desire to confront the PDRY.

As far as covert activity is concerned, Rory Cormac states that support for the Yemeni royalists during the 1960s was co-ordinated in Whitehall via the Joint Action Group, which remained as a means of directing British clandestine paramilitary operations up until at least the Soviet-Afghan war of 1979-1989.¹³ In the case of the Mahra raids, the initiative came from British officers serving with the SAF and OIS/ORD, responding to Qaboos’ wishes, and the files contain no reference to the Joint Action Group. Command and control for cross-border operations appeared to have been provided by the CSAF and the brigade commander in Dhofar, reporting through the Chiefs of Staff (COS) in London. Ministerial authorisation for the raids was provided in late 1972, although the archival evidence suggests that the most consistent supporter of this exercise in proxy warfare was General (later Field Marshal) Sir Michael Carver, who served as Chief of the General Staff from April 1971 to October 1973, and was subsequently the overall commander of the British armed forces (the Chief of the Defence Staff) from October 1973 to October 1976.¹⁴

The origins of the Mahra operation:

The Mahra tribal group inhabited the cross-border region between Saudi Arabia, Oman and the former PDRY, between the Najd, Dhofar and the Yemeni province of Al-Mahra.¹⁵ Following South Yemeni independence in December 1967 the lack of a clearly demarcated border contributed to clashes between the SAF and PDRY forces, and the bitter hostility between Muscat and Aden (arising principally from South Yemeni support to the PFLO insurgency) precluded a diplomatic resolution to the frontier dispute.¹⁶

Whilst al-Mahra was formally part of the Eastern Aden Protectorate until December 1967, up until 1963 before independence the tribes there had enjoyed considerable autonomy, and it was only in the final four years of their colonial presence that the British sought to extend their authority into the Mahra region.¹⁷ After the British withdrawal from South Arabia, al-Mahra became the 6th Governate of South Yemen, although its tribes became more restive as the new regime in Aden became progressively more Marxist-Leninist in both its ideology and policies. By October 1972 there were 75 Mahra exiles serving with the firqat forces, the Dhofari tribal militias established by Qaboos and trained by 22 SAS under the guise of the BATT. The 6th and 5th (Hadramaut) Governates of the PDRY together were the size of England, but the extent of government control over both were limited – British intelligence estimated that there were only 1,000 South Yemeni troops to cover the two governates.¹⁸ The Eastern PDRY was therefore theoretically well-suited for proxy warfare because of its size, terrain and also the truculence of the local tribes.

The concept of using the Mahras as proxies originated in the summer of 1969, at a time when the war in Dhofar was going badly for the SAF. In early June the CSAF, Brigadier Corran Purdon, was informed by his intelligence officers that a deserter from the South Yemeni army had

contacted them with a request for arms, funds and a safe haven. The unnamed defector pledged in return to provide 50 Mahra volunteers to help start a tribal rebellion, which would capture forts under government control, attack the PFLO's base in the border town of Hauf, and also cut the insurgency's supply lines into South Yemen.¹⁹ Purdon was also attracted to the possibility that a Mahra revolt might create a sympathetic buffer state between Oman and the PDRY, although Said rejected this proxy warfare proposal for that very reason, fearing that Mahra separatism would lead to territorial claims against Oman, destabilising the Sultanate in the process.²⁰ Qaboos, however, would have no such qualms.

Operation *Dhib* commences, October-November 1972:

1972 proved to be the pivotal year for the Dhofar war, as while the PFLO still posed a serious military threat to the SAF's control over the province, the latter began to undertake successful operations to contain the insurgency. In April 1972 Qaboos ordered the occupation of a defensive position at Sarfait, near the border, so as to cut the insurgency's supply lines to the PDRY. However, this operation (known as *Simba*) tied a battalion of SAF troops in a static defensive position which had been vulnerable to artillery and mortar fire from across the frontier, and the garrison at Sarfait could do little to interdict the traffic of arms, supplies and reinforcements across the border. Sustaining Sarfait stretched the army and Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF) to its limits, but the position could not be abandoned because it would constitute a propaganda victory for the PFLO. Nonetheless, the insurgents also over-reached themselves with a failed attempt to seize the town and fortress of Mirbat in Eastern Dhofar (19 July 1972), experiencing a costly defeat in the process, and the PFLO's efforts to build up a support network in Northern Oman were decisively disrupted by the OID and police with a series of arrests in December 1972. By the year's end, the Sultan was reportedly frustrated at the stalemate in Dhofar, whilst both

Oldman and the two senior officers serving as CSAF (Brigadier John Graham and (after September 1972) Major-General Tim Creasey) were concerned that Qaboos would order further operations that were beyond the limited capabilities that his armed forces and his British backers could provide. On the other hand, the 6th Governate of South Yemen was experiencing increasing tribal unrest which, the British defence attaché in Muscat noted, ‘could grow to represent a major distraction for the PDRY forces thereby lessening their willingness and ability to help the [PFLO]’.²¹

On 8 October 1972 Qaboos sent a request to the British government, via the UK embassy in Muscat, for assistance in training a Mahra firqa for ‘unattributable (sic) small scale guerrilla operations in the 6th province of the PDRY’. The defence attaché, Colonel C. S. Welch, informed the COS that ‘[enquiries] across the border indicate that the people will welcome and support any force attempting to restore their sovereignty’.²² The Sultan requested an additional presence of SAS personnel, to supplement the BATT which was training the Dhofari militias, and in addition to this request through official channels an OIS officer also contacted the Brigadier John Simpson, the commander of the British Army’s special forces, to request SAS assistance.²³ The proposal gained military approval, particularly after General Carver’s visit to Oman on 18 October; his military assistant noted that cross-border raids by the Mahra could ‘bring dividends’, ‘[winning] hearts and minds in the 6th Governate Area of the PDRY’. PFLO activities in South Yemen had been ‘entirely unmolested’, and paramilitary operations including sabotage, the mining of roads, and ambushes on PFLO and PDRY military convoys would disrupt the insurgents and their backers.²⁴ In this respect, a possible additional motive for instigating covert operations was revenge against the South Yemeni regime, not only for its support for the PFLO, but also for the successful insurgency its precursor, the National Liberation Front, had waged against British rule in South Arabia from 1962 to 1967.

Donald Hawley, the British ambassador to Oman, expressed his own concerns over a resort to proxy warfare. Whilst acknowledging that the Sultan's request was backed by British military officers in the SAF and the MOD, he stated that whilst '[a] diversion in the sixth province might take some of the heat out of rebel operations in Dhofar ... I have not been personally convinced that the game is worth the candle even from the Sultanate's point of view'. Hawley pointed out that Britain still had diplomatic relations with the PDRY, and that there would be political consequences if the UK provided military support to the Mahra. If any British-trained tribesmen were captured by South Yemeni security forces, the operation would no longer be 'unattributable', and Hawley also suspected that any programme of cross-border raids would be a prolonged one. Patrick Wright, the head of the Middle Eastern Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), cited additional risks, namely that waging a proxy war in South Yemen would '[divert] the Sultanate's efforts and resources (which are already inadequate) from meeting the rebellion within Oman itself', that Mahra separatism posed a potential threat to the integrity of the Sultanate, and that the cross-border operation could become public knowledge in the UK, which would in turn generate 'undesirable publicity' for 22SAS's own role fighting alongside the firqat forces in Dhofar itself. Wright nonetheless argued that British support for covert action would help the UK restrain Qaboos' desire for overt military retaliation against the PDRY, whilst the Mahra could be used as a bargaining counter to persuade Aden to stop backing the insurgents. He also noted that if 'the operation goes ahead with or without SAS help, Britain will probably be accused of conniving at it', and that '[we] may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, therefore; and try to make the operation as effective as possible.'²⁵

Ultimately, prevailing opinion within both the FCO and MOD stressed that despite the political risks involved in training the Mahra, the lack of British backing would enrage Qaboos, whose plans for covert action were supported by Saudi Arabia. The Saudis themselves – reportedly bent upon achieving regime change in Aden – would also blame the British for

appeasement in the face of South Yemen's subversive intentions in the region. Officials in Whitehall recommended that assistance be offered provided that it was limited, and enabled the UK to disavow any responsibility if any raiding parties were eliminated or captured by the South Yemenis. Six soldiers from 22SAS would be involved in training the Mahra, under the cover already provided by the BATT – the Mahra themselves could if necessary be passed off as a firqa raised for counter-insurgency operations in Oman itself.²⁶ On 23 November 1972, the Cabinet's Defence and Overseas Policy Committee authorised Operation *Dhib*, giving specific instructions that SAS troops were not to accompany the Mahra on their cross-border raids. The Prime Minister, Edward Heath, also stipulated that their authorisation was valid for six months, after which the COS would have to request renewed approval, and that 'any breach of security could lead to an immediate withdrawal of the SAS team and a [disavowal] of SAS involvement'.²⁷ This caveat meant that unlike the *Claret* cross-border raids conducted during the confrontation with Indonesia over Borneo (1963-1966), British military personnel would not become involved in combat operations in South Yemen itself. Indeed, BATT soldiers were barred from operating within 25 kilometres (16 miles) of the border.²⁸

Operation *Dhib* was therefore principally instigated as a concession to Qaboos, and in the hope that the employment of the Mahra as proxies would help the UK withstand the Sultan's demands for direct military intervention against South Yemen. In this respect, the use of special forces personnel to train them was as much a means of controlling these guerrillas as of enhancing their effectiveness in covert warfare. In fact, the Mahra project not only failed to address the Omani monarch's inclinations towards escalation, but it also encouraged him to demand an expansion of cross-border operations in the process.²⁹

The expansion of Operation *Dhib*, 1973:

From the British perspective, the main Mahra formation was the *Firqa al-Baadiya* which had been established in the autumn of 1971 to patrol the border between Dhofar and the PDRY. Following the Heath government's decision to support limited cross-border raids, this firqa had had an SAS training team assigned to it in January 1973, and it became based at Shisr, 70 miles from the Yemeni frontier. This force consisted of around 100 fighters, and was judged by Colonel Welch to be 'probably incapable of more than the odd nuisance raid or skirmish, albeit deep in PDRY territory'. There were at least two other Mahra groups active at this time; the *Jaish al-Asifat*, which was recruited with Saudi funding for raids into the 4th and 5th Governates of South Yemen, and an unnamed unit of 250 Mahra tribesmen, which Qaboos established without consulting the British government.³⁰

Detailed information on the scope of the Mahra operations is scant, particularly for the *Jaish al-Asifat*, which had no British direction or training. There is also no information on the specifics of the training programmes, or details about how the Mahra were armed and trained, although it is reasonable to presume that advice on ambush tactics and setting mines was provided, and the weapons supplied were presumably not British in origin.³¹ What we now know is that the cross-border incursions appear to have been sporadic in frequency, involving 30 fighters at the most with each incursion, and the attacks on PDRY targets were small in scale. A raid on a South Yemeni military convoy in May 1973 reportedly destroyed seven trucks, with the Mahra killing 22 enemy soldiers and capturing one.³²

On 2 May 1973 Qaboos, evidently dissatisfied with the limited number of cross-border operations, ordered Creasey to establish the Southern Mahra firqa. The CSAF noted that due to tribal feuds between the latter and the Northern clansmen serving with the *Firqa al-Baadiya*, this

new formation could not be based at Shisr, and a second SAS team would be required to train it. Hawley reported that the Governor of Dhofar Province, Buraik bin Hamud al-Ghafiri, sided with the Southern Mahra and advocated the creation of a separate firqa for them; Buraik had a considerable amount of influence over Qaboos because he had played a key role in instigating the coup of July 1970. The ambassador, however, regarded the Southern Mahra as 'unimpressive', and Creasey also 'urged [the Sultan] not to let the politically grasping but militarily ineffectives of (sic) the South sour and adversely affect the Northerners who are presently doing so well'.³³ In Whitehall, there were concerns within the FCO over the impact of extended cross-border activity, and also the threat of reprisal attacks by the PFLO against SAS personnel in Dhofar. The COS also noted that the Mahra tribes may have been infiltrated by South Yemeni intelligence, as there had been 'a small number of low-grade defections from the Mahra Firqat and subsequent reference to their operations on Aden Radio', although these broadcasts had 'not attracted any adverse publicity elsewhere'. The British military chiefs also dismissed the likelihood that expanded operations would increase the already considerable risk to the 22SAS contingent in Dhofar, and also argued that Mahra operations provided an 'additional and useful source of intelligence' on PDRY military capabilities for the MOD's Defence Intelligence Service.³⁴

Creasey received ministerial authorisation to train the Southern Mahra on 1 June 1973, although contrary to his initial recommendations the British government refused to deploy a second SAS team, directing CSAF that all training for cross-border incursions should take place at the *Firqa al-Baadiya*'s base at Shisr regardless of tribal tensions. The Southern Mahra were also confined to patrolling and internal security operations in Dhofar until Operation *Dhib*'s subsequent ministerial review, in January 1974.³⁵ In fact, their firqa was never deployed on guerrilla operations in South Yemen.

Controlling the Mahra, 1974-1975:

During the course of 1974 the military situation in Dhofar changed decisively in the Sultanate's favour, not least because Shah Reza Pahlavi of Iran sent a brigade of troops backed by a strong air force contingent to reinforce the SAF. In March 1974 Labour regained office following the British general election, and although Harold Wilson's government was as committed to supporting the Omani monarchy as Heath's had been, both he and his Defence Secretary, Roy Mason, expressed the same caveats about escalation and over-commitment of scant UK military resources as their Conservative predecessors. This was augmented in Labour's case by the hostility that its left-wing MPs and party members felt towards overseas interventions, demonstrated by the condemnation that some backbenchers offered towards British policy in Oman.³⁶

Thanks mainly to Iranian military support, the SAF was eventually able to drive the bulk of the PFLO out of Dhofar by December 1975, although during this phase of the war the potential for an all-out confrontation with the PDRY became more pronounced. This scenario was an issue of considerable concern for the British because the South Yemeni armed forces were well-equipped for conventional warfare (its inventory included Soviet-supplied fighter jets and bombers) in comparison with the SAF. Creasey noted in August 1974 that Aden had bolstered its military and security force presence in the 5th and 6th Governates, due to 'our trans border operations, our frontier positions, and the Iranian presence in Dhofar', and by the end of the year there were about 3,000 South Yemeni troops facing the Omani frontier. By this point, South Yemeni militiamen had infiltrated Oman in order to bolster the PFLO, and in October 1975 there were a series of border clashes, culminating with SAF artillery and SOAF air-strikes on Hauf.³⁷

The *Firqa al-Baadiya* was regarded as an effective proxy by the British, particularly for the intelligence it gathered on South Yemeni military capabilities, although following an incursion in the autumn of 1973 Creasey ordered a pause in their operations on 20 October. As one senior MOD official noted, this raid ‘produced a strong PDRY reaction and measures by them against local tribesmen suspected of assisting the [*Firqa al-Baadyia*]. As a result CSAF has temporarily stopped cross-border action by that Firqat until the dust settles’. Carver also suspected that the Northern Mahra raids could have provoked a South Yemeni air strike on Makinat Shihan, an outpost on the border occupied by the SAF and Dhofari militiamen, on 18 November. Nonetheless, incursions into South Yemen resumed in March 1974, and over the next six months the *Firqa al-Baadiya* carried out three incursions, killing at least 20 enemy personnel. Even in this case, as one of Creasey’s staff noted, this force was directed to ‘restrict [its] operations to low scale guerrilla type raids, and reconnaissance patrols’, and it was ‘forbidden to engage PDRY regular forces in full scale battle’, in order to ‘reduce the risk of retaliation [against Oman], and to keep to the minimum repressive measures by PDRY against the Mahra tribe’.³⁸ The CSAF was therefore not only concerned about provoking a wider confrontation with South Yemen, but also showed an awareness that a cycle of rebellion and security force retaliation in the Mahra territory could lead to a civil war within South Yemen, which in turn would increase the likelihood of hostilities between Oman and the PDRY.

The fate of the Southern Mahra firqa is less easy to determine. Although ministerial authorisation for training this formation was provided in June 1973, from official correspondence it appears that contrary to British wishes it was not co-located with the *Firqa al-Baadiya*, presumably because of the inter-tribal tensions between the Northern and Southern Mahra noted above. The declassified evidence does not indicate what position Qaboos himself took, although as the Chief of the Defence Staff noted the Sultan ‘attaches great importance to the Southern Mahra’ firqa, and may well have withstood British requests to send them to Shisr for training.

This formation was directed by Creasey to ‘operate initially inside Oman’, but the CSAF reported ‘that this has been ineffective because of its inadequate training, control and tasking’. One MOD official noted that if the Southern Mahra were used on cross-border raids in their current condition ‘their operations could prove an embarrassment’. In early January 1974 Creasey therefore repeated the Sultan’s request for a second 22SAS team to support this formation. This request received the support of the COS and MOD, and with ministerial approval special forces personnel were attached to the Southern Mahra for the next five months.³⁹

This extension of Operation *Dhib* proved, however, to be short-lived. Whilst the British envisaged cross-border raids as a means of satisfying Qaboos’ urge for wider retaliation against South Yemen, the Southern Mahra were separatists bent upon establishing an independent state, and their relationship with the Governor of Dhofar undermined the efforts of British military officials to control them. There was therefore, as one MOD official observed, ‘a decline of discipline and a measure of challenge to effective command by CSAF’, and faced with the possibility that the Southern Mahra firqa would go rogue Creasey ordered the withdrawal of the SAS contingent assigned to it, ceasing training for cross-border incursions and confining this formation to counter-insurgency operations in Dhofar alongside locally-raised militias. Given that the British were anxious to avoid a prolonged engagement in Oman, and due to their limited aspirations for the Mahra proxies, the demise of this firqa was probably welcomed by officials in London and Muscat.⁴⁰

In contrast, the *Firqa al-Baadiya* remained operational at least until January 1975, when Carver again requested the Defence Secretary’s approval for the continuation both of Operation *Dhib*, and the SAS training mission for the Northern Mahra. Declassified UK government files do not disclose whether further ministerial authorisation was forthcoming, or exactly when the cross-border raids ceased. What is evident is that both Creasey and his superiors in the COS believed

that the 22SAS training teams not only prepared the Mahra for incursions into South Yemen, but also restricted their scope in accordance with CSAF's intentions and UK government policy. As one British officer attached to SAF headquarters noted, the SAS soldiers involved 'have played an invaluable, if unspectacular, role under very difficult and trying conditions both of climatic (sic) and those endemic to dealing with the Mahra tribesmen', and had enabled the British to counter both Sultan Qaboos' more ambitious intention to destabilise the PDRY and their Mahra proxies' dream of independence from Aden. As such, British special forces 'have played a vital role in preventing these operations from escalating into full scale fighting, from which Oman and SAF, would tend to lose more than they gain'.⁴¹ Operation *Dhib* therefore ran contrary to other documented cases of covert action and proxy warfare, as the UK's main purpose in supporting the Mahra's cross-border raids was to influence the policy of an ally (the Omani monarchy) rather than an adversary (the PDRY).

Conclusions:

Due to the limitations of the documentary evidence there are certain questions which this article cannot address, one of which is the extent to which the Mahra raiding parties were supported by their tribal counterparts in South Yemen. The second involves the history of the Saudi-backed *Jaish al-Asifat*, the Saudi-sponsored firqa which operated without British oversight. The third concerns the exact end of the Mahra operation, although there is fragmentary evidence to suggest Saudi Arabia was instigating tribal subversion in the PDRY during the early 1980s; such activity (if indeed it was conducted) was possibly a legacy of Operation *Dhib*. In the aftermath of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (25-27 December 1979) the British did consider renewed covert action against the PDRY, although at least one senior FCO diplomat expressed his opposition, describing South Yemen as 'a country of venal [and] untrustworthy intriguers', and

asserting that any attempt to influence local proxies there was ‘a lottery’. Whilst British assistance to the Afghan mujahidin is a matter of historical record, we do not know if this proposal to instigate revolt in the PDRY had any concrete results. Indeed, given South Yemen’s volatility during the 1980s it is doubtful as to whether significant external covert action was required to destabilise it.⁴²

What declassified British government files do demonstrate is that the UK’s role in waging proxy warfare against South Yemen during the early 1970s does not conform to established theories about why states conduct covert paramilitary operations. Sultan Qaboos appears to have intended to use the Mahra in a coercive role, responding to the PDRY’s own support for the insurgency in Dhofar, whilst the Saudis (at least according to British officials) wanted to overthrow the Marxist-Leninist regime in Aden. In contrast, whilst there was a hope that the Mahra could disrupt the PFLO with its cross-border attacks, Operation *Dhib* was primarily viewed both by the UK government, and British officers attached to the Omani armed forces, as a means of curbing Qaboos’ demands for punitive action which could lead to a war between South Yemen and Oman. Such a scenario would in turn either oblige Britain to commit itself further to its ally’s defence – placing a potentially intolerable burden on its over-stretched armed forces – or would lead to an embarrassing decision to abandon the Sultanate to its fate, which would have been a damaging blow both for Western interests and the UK’s residual influence in the region. British officials were also aware that Saudi Arabia was a rival for influence in Oman, and that Saudi officials were telling Qaboos that the UK would prove to be an unreliable ally. The Mahra cross-border raids were therefore a means primarily of addressing the Omani monarch’s wishes and of forestalling any policy decisions by him that could turn the counter-insurgency campaign in Dhofar into an inter-state confrontation between the Sultanate and the PDRY. They were also intended to demonstrate to Qaboos that the British were dependable partners, even if the scope of their regional influence had declined since the

withdrawal from their military bases in South Arabia (December 1967) and the Arabian Gulf (December 1971).⁴³

In this respect, the scope of Operation *Dhib* was limited, and both ministers and officials in Whitehall and the CSAF exercised the same tight control over the Mahra as their counterparts had done with covert aid to the royal rebellion in Yemen during the 1960s. Scholars of covert action and proxy warfare observe that paramilitary activity can lead to uncontrolled escalation, either because the proxy forces concerned are unsuccessful (which obliges sponsoring states to provide more aid, and possibly personnel, to prevent their defeat) or paradoxically because they are too successful (at which point the target state either collapses or retaliates against the sponsors). Furthermore, the provision of aid to a proxy does not necessarily mean that a sponsor can exercise political control or strategic direction.⁴⁴ Whilst senior British military officers – notably Carver and Creasey – offered the most persistent support for *Dhib*, there was a common recognition that cross-border operations should be limited in number and restricted in scale. In addition, the brief engagement with and abandonment of the Southern Mahra firqa (January-June 1974) showed that the British would not permit or facilitate incursions into the PDRY by a proxy formation that they could not command and control. The *Firqa al-Baadiya* received SAS assistance from November 1972 to at least January 1975 because whilst its guerrillas fought for a separate Mahra state, their activities could be directed and managed by the British, as demonstrated by the pause in their operations that Creasey ordered in October 1973.

Above all, with Operation *Dhib* the British avoided the same strategic mistake that, to take two analogous examples, the Americans experienced during the Vietnam War (1961-1973) and the South Africans in Namibia (1961-1990). There is a temptation for states involved in fighting insurgencies to view retaliation against the latter's external backers as a decisive means of crippling an adversary and winning an internal war. So in this regard the USA backed the

Hmong in Laos (1961-1973) in the hope that the latter would cut the Ho Chi Minh trail linking North Vietnam with the *Viet Cong* in the South, whilst South Africa armed and assisted UNITA in Angola because it saw the MPLA regime as a critical source of support both for the African National Congress and the Namibian national liberation movement, SWAPO.⁴⁵ In contrast, British ministers, diplomats and senior military officers did not presume that the cessation of South Yemeni support would critically weaken the PFLO itself. Operation *Dhib* did not become a priority over SAF operations and the political effort to legitimise Sultan Qaboos' regime, because there was a collective understanding in London and Muscat that the war against the PFLO insurgency could only be fought and won in Dhofar itself.

Endnotes:

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¹ Marc DeVore, 'The United Kingdom's last hot war of the Cold War: Oman, 1963-75', *Cold War History* 11 (2011): 441-71; & DeVore, 'A more complex and conventional victory: revisiting the Dhofar counterinsurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23 (2012): 144-73. Clive Jones, 'Military Intelligence, Tribes, and Britain's War in Dhofar, 1970-1976', *Middle East Journal* 65 (2011): 557-74; & Jones, 'A Guiding Hand or Controlling Grasp? Britain, Intelligence, and the War in Oman, 1970-76', in Saul Kelly and Jeffrey R. Macris (ed.), *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press 2012), 93-107. Walter Ladwig III, 'Supporting allies in counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19 (2008): 62-88. James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris 2014). The insurgent movement in Dhofar changed its name on four occasions during the conflict, but it will be referred to as the PFLO throughout this article.

² Between 30 November 1967 and 1 November 1970 the official title for this state was the 'Popular Republic of South Yemen' (see Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (I. B. Tauris 2011), 31-49). Again, the author uses 'PDRY' and 'South Yemen' for convenience's sake.

³ See, for example, Tony Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the Special Air Service* (London: Fontana 1983), 177-8.

⁴ This definition is drawn from William J. Daugherty, 'Covert Action: Strengths and Weaknesses', in Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 608-10; and also John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II through the*

Persian Gulf (Chicago IL: Ivan R. Dee 1996), 28-9. On proxy war see Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press 2012), 2, 12, 20-2.

⁵ Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949-1961* (London: I. B. Tauris 2014), xi-xiv, 1-6, 166-8.

⁶ Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate 2001), 558-99. Rathmell, *Secret War*, 112-24. Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War, 1962-1965* (Sussex Academic Press 2004). Duff Hart Davis, *The War That Never Was* (London: Century Press 2011).

⁷ Geraint Hughes, 'A 'Model Campaign' Reappraised: The Counter-Insurgency War in Dhofar, Oman, 1965-1975', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32 (2009): 271-305

⁸ See, for example, in the parliamentary journal *Hansard*: H.C.Deb5s (868), Written Answers, January 28 1974, 25-26; H.C.Deb5s (872), Written Answers, April 30 1974, 419-420.

⁹ COS46/73, *Future United Kingdom Defence Activity in Oman*, 31 December 1973, DEFE5/197(National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew – hereafter NAUK). COS13/74, *The Principals Governing British Military Assistance to Oman*, 23 May 1974, DEFE11/655(NAUK).

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¹² Rory Cormac, *Confronting the Colonies: British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency* (London: C. Hurst 2013), 157-69. John Graham, *Ponder Anew: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (Staplehurst, UK: Spellmount 1999), 323, 330-1. Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency*, p.285. Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Napier (MOD), *Record of Conversations in Muscat*, 9 April 1974, DEFE11/655(NAUK).

¹³ Rory Cormac, 'Coordinating Covert Action: The Case of the Yemen Civil War and the South Arabian Insurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36 (2013): 692-717.

¹⁴ Minute by A. J. Cragg (MOD), 21 February 1973, DEFE11/760(NAUK). D. B. Omand (MOD) to Peter Carrington (Defence Secretary), 11 January 1974, DEFE13/964(NAUK).

¹⁵ DOP Note 726/72(Draft), *Request from Oman For British Military Aid for the Support of Guerrilla Bands on Special Operations*, 19 October 1972, DEFE11/736(NAUK). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who provided additional information on the Mahra's homeland, and their relationship with other tribes in Oman.

¹⁶ Colonel C. S. Welch (Defence Attaché, Muscat) to Colonel B. J. Coombe (MOD), 9 September 1972; & P. J. Clarke (MOD) to Coombe, 26 September 1972, DEFE11/736(NAUK).

¹⁷ Spencer Makby, *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates, 1955-67. Last Outpost of a Middle East Empire* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge 2005), 23, 37, 106-7.

¹⁸ P. R. H. Wright (Middle Eastern Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office), *The Proposed Mahra Operation*, 25 October 1972, DEFE11/736(NAUK). *Directive from Commander Land Forces Gulf for the Officer Commanding B Squadron Group 22 Special Air Services Regiment*, 18 September 1970, FCO8/2237(NAUK). DOP Note 726/72(Draft), DEFE11/736(NAUK).

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²¹ Hughes, 'Dhofar', 271-2, 284, 293. Clarke to Coombe, 26 September 1972, DEFE11/736(NAUK). Welch, *Annual Report for 1972*, 6 December 1972, FCO8/2022(NAUK).

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- ³⁸ Byers to Gilmour: & Carver to Gilmour, 9 January 1974, DEFE13/964(NAUK). Green to Welch, DEFE32/22(NAUK).
- ³⁹ Carver to Gilmour, 9 January 1974; & Abraham to Mason, DEFE32/22(NAUK).
- ⁴⁰ Abraham to Mason; Colonel P. F. G. Allardyce (Defence Attaché, Muscat) to Bagnall, 21 October 1974; & Green to Welch, DEFE32/22(NAUK).
- ⁴¹ Green to Welch; & Carver to Mason, 6 January 1975, DEFE32/22(NAUK).
- ⁴² Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (NY: Simon & Schuster 1987), 78. Minute by R. T. Jackling (MOD), 21 January 1980, AIR8/2811(NAUK). C. W. Mallaby (head of East European and Soviet Department) to Ewen Fergusson (Assistant Under-Secretary Europe), 1 February 1980, in Patrick Salmon et al (ed.), *Documents on British Policy Overseas: Series III, Volume VIII. The Invasion of Afghanistan and UK-Soviet Relations* (Routledge 2011), 110. Brehony, *Yemen Divided*, 151-62.
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